May Skies

The superstar of the skies this month is none other than the Moon! So we’ll lead off this month by saying that the Moon will be full on the 6th, last quarter on the 12th, new on the 20th and first quarter on the 28th. On the 6th the full moon should appear larger than normal. That is because the Moon’s orbit around the earth is elliptical. It happens that on the 6th, the full Moon will coincide with the Perigee of the Moon’s orbit, closest to the Earth at 220,160 miles, as opposed to the Apogee at 249,182 miles.

The next big event for the Moon will be on the 20th when those of us who live in parts of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada and California will get to witness an annular eclipse of the Sun. Annular means “ring like.” The moon will be far enough from the earth that it will not cover the entire sun resulting in a bright ring surrounding the Moon during totality.

The timing of this event is such that most of us will only get a brief glimpse of totality which will occur at 6:30 p.m. PDT, 7:30 p.m. MDT and 8:30 p.m. CDT for northern Texas. This means that totality will occur just above the western horizon. In addition to the usual warnings about using appropriate UV filters to watch a solar eclipse, don’t be fooled about the annular ring. You MUST have PROPER EYE PROTECTION at all times! If you live outside the eclipse area may I suggest you come to New Mexico? The centerline runs almost directly through Albuquerque and the weather prospects for viewing the eclipse are excellent!

We are not quite finished with the Moon yet! On the 4th, about an hour after sunset the nearly full Moon will be below Saturn and the bright star Spica in Virgo. On the 22nd the crescent Moon will be found just above the western horizon and to the left of Venus. On the 30th the Moon will once again visit Saturn and Spica.

With Jupiter heading towards conjunction with the Sun on the 13th, Venus will continue to dazzle us in the early evening western sky. At 36 degrees elevation and magnitude -4.7 we will see it, for the first part of the month, with almost 30% of its clouded atmosphere illuminated. However, breath taking changes are coming. Shortly after the beginning of the month Venus will appear to rapidly plunge toward the western horizon. By the end of the month it will be barely visible above the western horizon as it heads for a historic transit across the face of the Sun. More about that in next month’s column.

Mars will continue to appear high in the early evening sky shining at about magnitude 0.0 at the beginning of the month. By the end of the month it will fade slightly to magnitude +0.5. Because of its elevation in the night sky this is the best time to make telescopic observations of the red planet.

Saturn is also well placed for telescopic observations appearing at 25 degrees elevation in the southeast just after sunset. Keeping company with the bright star Spica in Virgo its magnitude will fade from +0.3 to +0.5 as the month progresses. The rings will also close slightly as Saturn continues its slight retrograde motion in the sky.
Clear Skies!

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